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# Urban and Regional Planners

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## Significant Points

- Local governments employ 7 out of 10 urban and regional planners.
- Most entry-level jobs require a master's degree; bachelor's degree holders may find some entry-level positions, but advancement opportunities are limited.
- Most new jobs will arise in affluent, rapidly growing urban and suburban communities.

## Nature of the Work

Planners develop long-term and short-term plans to use land for the growth and revitalization of urban, suburban, and rural communities, while helping local officials make decisions concerning social, economic, and environmental problems. Because local governments employ the majority of urban and regional planners, they often are referred to as community, regional, or city planners.

Planners promote the best use of a community's land and resources for residential, commercial, institutional, and recreational purposes. Planners may be involved in various other activities, including making decisions relating to establishing alternative public transportation systems, developing resources, and protecting ecologically sensitive regions. Urban and regional planners address issues such as traffic congestion, air pollution, and the effects of growth and change on a community. They may formulate plans relating to the construction of new school buildings, public housing, or other kinds of infrastructure. Some planners are involved in environmental issues ranging from pollution control to wetland preservation, forest conservation, and the location of new landfills. Planners also may be involved in drafting legislation on environmental, social, and economic issues, such as sheltering the homeless, planning a new park, or meeting the demand for new correctional facilities.

Planners examine proposed community facilities, such as schools, to be sure that these facilities will meet the changing demands placed upon them over time. They keep abreast of economic and legal issues involved in zoning codes, building codes, and environmental regulations. They ensure that builders and developers follow these codes and regulations. Planners also deal with land-use issues created by population movements. For example, as suburban growth and economic development create more new jobs outside cities, the need for public transportation that enables workers to get to those jobs increases. In response, planners develop transportation models and explain their details to planning boards and the general public.

Before preparing plans for community development, planners report on the current use of land for residential, business, and community purposes. Their reports include information on the location and capacity of streets, highways, airports, water and sewer lines, schools, libraries, and cultural and recreational sites. They also provide data on the types of industries in the community, the characteristics of the population, and employment and economic trends. Using this information, along with input from citizens' advisory committees, planners

design the layout of land uses for buildings and other facilities such as subway lines and stations. Planners prepare reports showing how their programs can be carried out and what they will cost.

Planners use computers to record and analyze information and to prepare reports and recommendations for government executives and others. Computer databases, spreadsheets, and analytical techniques are widely utilized to project program costs and forecast future trends in employment, housing, transportation, or population. Computerized geographic information systems enable planners to map land areas, to overlay maps with geographic variables such as population density, and to combine or manipulate geographic information to produce alternative plans for land use or development.

Urban and regional planners often confer with land developers, civic leaders, and public officials and may function as mediators in community disputes, presenting alternatives that are acceptable to opposing parties. Planners may prepare material for community relations programs, speak at civic meetings, and appear before legislative committees and elected officials to explain and defend their proposals.

In large organizations, planners usually specialize in a single area, such as transportation, demography, housing, historic preservation, urban design, environmental and regulatory issues, or economic development. In small organizations, planners do various kinds of planning.

## Working Conditions

Urban and regional planners often travel to inspect the features of land under consideration for development or regulation, including its current use and the types of structures on it. Some local government planners involved in site development inspections spend most of their time in the field. Although most planners have a scheduled 40-hour workweek, they frequently attend evening or weekend meetings or public hearings with citizens' groups. Planners may experience the pressure of deadlines and tight work schedules, as well as political pressure generated by interest groups affected by proposals related to urban development and land use.



*Urban and regional planners help to determine the locations of housing developments, businesses, schools, and hospitals in a community.*

## Employment

Urban and regional planners held about 32,000 jobs in 2002. About 7 out of 10 were employed by local governments. Companies involved with architectural, engineering, and related services, as well as management, scientific, and technical consulting services, employ an increasing proportion of planners in the private sector. Others are employed in State government agencies dealing with housing, transportation, or environmental protection, and a small number work for the Federal Government.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

For jobs as urban and regional planners, employers prefer workers who have advanced training. Most entry-level jobs in Federal, State, and local government agencies require a master's degree from an accredited program in urban or regional planning or a master's degree in a related field, such as urban design or geography. A bachelor's degree from an accredited planning program, coupled with a master's degree in architecture, landscape architecture, or civil engineering, is good preparation for entry-level planning jobs in various areas, including urban design, transportation, and the environment. A master's degree from an accredited planning program provides the best training for a wide range of planning fields. Although graduates from one of the limited number of accredited bachelor's degree programs qualify for some entry-level positions, their advancement opportunities often are limited, unless they acquire an advanced degree.

Courses in related disciplines, such as architecture, law, earth sciences, demography, economics, finance, health administration, geographic information systems, and management, are highly recommended. Because familiarity with computer models and statistical techniques is important, courses in statistics and computer science also are recommended.

In 2003, 67 colleges and universities offered an accredited master's degree program, and 13 offered an accredited bachelor's degree program, in urban or regional planning. Accreditation for these programs is from the Planning Accreditation Board, which consists of representatives of the American Institute of Certified Planners, the American Planning Association, and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. Most graduate programs in planning require a minimum of 2 years of study.

Specializations most commonly offered by planning schools are environmental planning, land use and comprehensive planning, economic development, housing, historic preservation, and social planning. Other popular offerings include community development, transportation, and urban design. Graduate students spend considerable time in studios, workshops, and laboratory courses learning to analyze and solve planning problems. They often are required to work in a planning office part time or during the summer. Local government planning offices frequently offer students internships, providing experience that proves invaluable in obtaining a full-time planning position after graduation.

The American Institute of Certified Planners, a professional institute within the American Planning Association, grants certification to individuals who have the appropriate combination of education and professional experience and who pass an examination. Certification may be helpful for promotion.

Planners must be able to think in terms of spatial relationships and visualize the effects of their plans and designs. They should be flexible and be able to reconcile different viewpoints and make constructive policy recommendations. The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, is necessary for anyone interested in this field.

After a few years of experience, planners may advance to assignments requiring a high degree of independent judgment, such as designing the physical layout of a large development or recommending policy and budget options. Some public-sector planners are promoted to community planning director and spend a great deal of time meeting with officials, speaking to civic groups, and supervising a staff. Further advancement occurs through a transfer to a larger jurisdiction with more complex problems and greater responsibilities or into related occupations, such as director of community or director of economic development.

## Job Outlook

Employment of urban and regional planners is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2012. Employment growth will be driven by the need for State and local governments to provide public services such as regulation of commercial development, the environment, transportation, housing, and land use and development for an expanding population. Nongovernmental initiatives dealing with historic preservation and redevelopment will provide additional openings. Some job openings also will arise from the need to replace experienced planners who transfer to other occupations, retire, or leave the labor force for other reasons. Graduates with a degree from an accredited program should have an advantage in the job market.

Most planners work for local governments with limited resources and many demands for services. When communities need to cut expenditures, planning services may be cut before basic services, such as police, firefighting, and education. Budget constraints could limit job growth in government; as a result, the number of openings for consulting positions in private industry is expected to grow more rapidly than the number of openings in government.

Most new jobs for urban and regional planners will arise in affluent, rapidly expanding communities. Local governments need planners to address an array of problems associated with population growth. For example, new housing developments require roads, sewer systems, fire stations, schools, libraries, and recreation facilities that must be planned for in the midst of a consideration of budgetary constraints. Smalltown chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, and tourism bureaus may hire planners, preferably with some background in marketing and public relations.

## Earnings

Median annual earnings of urban and regional planners were \$49,880 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$39,210 and \$62,710. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$31,830, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$76,700. Median annual earnings in local government, the industry employing the largest number of urban and regional planners, were \$48,950.

**Related Occupations**

Urban and regional planners develop plans for the growth of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Others whose work is similar include architects, civil engineers, environmental engineers, landscape architects, and geographers.

**Sources of Additional Information**

Information on careers, salaries, and certification in urban and regional planning is available from

- American Planning Association, Education Division, 122 South Michigan Ave., Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60603-6107. Internet: <http://www.planning.org>
- Information on accredited urban and regional planning programs is available from
- Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, 6311 Mallard Trace, Tallahassee, FL 32312. Internet: <http://www.acsp.org>